ENOUGH TO MAKE A GROWN MAN CRY
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Psalm 130
John 11:17–44

"Jesus began to weep."
John 11:35 (NRSV)

When we reach beyond our fears to the One who loves us with a love
that was there before we were born and will be there after we die,
then oppression, persecution, and even death will be unable to take our freedom.
Once we have come to the deep inner knowledge—
a knowledge more of the heart than the mind—
that we are born out of love and will die into love,
that every part of our being is deeply rooted in love,
and that this love is our true Father and Mother,
then all forms of evil, illness, and death lose their final power over us.

Henri Nouwen
Our Greatest Gift:
A Meditation on Dying and Caring

Startle us, O God, with your truth.
As we travel through this Lenten season on our way to the cross,
help us to see and to hear and to know the power of life
which is in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Back in the dark ages, when little children were sent to Sunday School to learn Bible stories, the primary pedagogical strategy was memorization. Children memorized Bible verses, and much of the class time was dedicated to the recitation of those verses of scripture. The inducement, the reward for correctly reciting a Bible verse, was a little sticker that the child affixed to an 8x10 picture of, say, a green meadow—the stickers for which would be, appropriately, little lambs—or a flowery garden—the stickers for which would be kittens or puppies. The idea was to recite as many verses as you could memorize and therefore accumulate as many stickers on your picture as possible during the year. So it was, essentially, underneath it all, competition: head-to-head, nose-to-nose competition, and I loved it. My flowering garden was full of kittens, kittens everywhere, in the grass, on the bushes, up in the trees. I even had a border of upside down kittens around

my garden, which was probably a little show-offy. When the competition began, the rule was that a particular verse could be recited just once that day. Without fail the child who was called on first recited John 11:35: “Jesus wept.” Two words. The shortest verse in the Bible until the new translation expanded it by fiddling with the verb: “Jesus began to weep.” But it remains in many memories and many hearts two words: “Jesus wept.”

Jesus wept because his friend Lazarus died. And so, in addition to being the shortest verse in the Bible, it is emotionally and theologically suggestive: Jesus experienced grief. Jesus experienced that most common, most exquisitely painful, of all human experiences, the death of a loved one. Lazarus’s death, and all that entailed, the loss of a treasured friend, a reminder of the brevity and fragility of all human life, a reminder of the inevitability of his own death, which at that very moment was looming on the horizon—it was enough to make a grown man cry.

So Jesus wept. And so have we all.

In his wonderful memoir, *Credo*, William Sloane Coffin thinks out loud in the last chapter, “The End of Life,” about death. Coffin, in his late 70s, is not well himself, so his words have an immediacy about them, and as always, they are wise and human and wry and playful.

“Without death, we’d never live,” Coffin says. “Consider only the alternative—life without death. Life without death would be interminable—literally, figuratively. We’d take days just to get out of bed, weeks to decide ‘what’s next?’ Students would never graduate, faculty meetings and all kinds of other gathering would go on for months.” For one who has already spent a significant portion of his life sitting in meetings, that image of life without death evolving into an endless church committee meeting sounds, frankly, hellish!

Without death, Coffin suggests, “chances are we’d be bored.” So “death cannot be the enemy if it’s death that brings us to life.”

And finally, with a twinkle in his eye: “With no deaths there would long since have been no births, the world being overpopulated with immortal beings. Just think: Giotto maybe, but no Cézanne, let alone Andy Warhol; Purcell maybe, but no Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, let alone Aaron Copland; Roman gladiators yes, but no Sugar Ray Robinson or Mohammad Ali. And, of course, no you and me, no grandchildren!” (pp. 167–168).

“Jesus began to weep” is a small detail in a much larger story: the death and raising of Lazarus. In John’s Gospel, the trajectory of that larger story is turning toward Jerusalem and Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion. Word comes to Jesus that his friend Lazarus is ill. Lazarus and his sisters,

Martha and Mary, live in Bethany, a small town near Jerusalem. They are very good friends, the four of them, apparently. There is an easy familiarity between Jesus and the two women. Against the advice of his disciples, Jesus decides to go to Lazarus's side. But he waits several days. When he arrives, Lazarus is already dead. Both Mary and Martha express exasperation that he didn't arrive sooner. The mourners, friends of the family, also wonder what was keeping him and if what people were saying about his miraculous power were true why he didn't exercise some of it on behalf of his dear friend.

And then Jesus wept. What happened next is difficult for us. Jesus has already told Martha and Mary, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die"—words that we read at every memorial service.

So in his grief, his eyes still wet from his tears, "greatly disturbed" John says, Jesus orders the stone rolled away, even though practical Martha is fussing, busily objecting to the aesthetics of such a thing. And of all things Jesus shouts into the open grave, "Lazarus, come out of there!" Without comment, the story concludes: "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in cloth. Jesus said to them: 'Unbind him and let him go.'" And that's it.

There were two immediate results. People were astonished; people believed in this one who in the name of God restores life, brings life out of death. And the authorities begin to plan in earnest how to get rid of him. Apparently the authority to resist the power of death is a threat to public order or to their authority.

Now at this point, we moderns who have been following right along say, "Wait a minute! Let's go over that again. Things like that just don't happen." And we start going down the road of biological plausibility. After all, lots of people do have near-death experiences and come back, to talk about them on late-night television. Or we go down the road of doctrinal precision: if Jesus is the Son of God, God incarnate, the second person of the Trinity, he can do whatever he wants to do, including breaking every biological, physiological rule in the book and raising a dead man. As enjoyable as the roads are, however, I want to call us back from them and invite us to ponder the real question, the question that emerges from our Presbyterian way of reading scripture: namely, what is the word of God here? What is God saying to us in this text? What in us is being addressed—or to put it particularly, what in us is being called out? What in us is God calling to get up and walk away from death into life?

Jesus wept. Was Lazarus' death the first experience Jesus had with loss as an adult? Typically, not always, but typically, we sail through the first two or three decades of life; we lose some grandparents and aunts and uncles along the way, and in the fourth decade our lives crash into the reality of death when someone we dearly love dies. The death of a parent comes out of the blue and stuns us and reverberates in our lives every day thereafter. And life is never quite the same again. I love something Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his parents on Christmas Eve 1943, from his Nazi prison cell:

> Nothing can make up for the absence of someone we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a kind of substitute: we must simply hold out and see it through. This sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap: he doesn't fill it, but on the contrary he keeps it empty and so helps us keep alive our communion with each other. (*The Christian Century*, 14 December 20)

Death deepens us, makes us more able to understand and stand with one another. Clergy know that you don't become a pastor until you have picked up a few personal wounds; you can't help people through the valley of the shadow of death until you've been in it yourself.

The death of someone close changes something deep inside. When his dear friend Charles Williams died, C. S. Lewis wrote, "No event has so corroborated my faith in the next world as Williams did simply by dying. When the idea of death and the idea of Williams thus met in my mind, it was the idea of death that changed" (Robert McAfee Brown, "Meditation on a Particular Death," *The Pseudonyms of God*, p. 159).

Susan Vogel is a dean and professor at St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City. Her son died in an automobile accident, and she wrote a book about it. She thanks the friend who sent her a quote from Roger Kahn: "The world is never again as it was before anyone you love has died; never so innocent, never so fixed, never so gentle, never so pliant to your will." Everything changed for Vogel, including her theology. Like most of us, she never paid much attention to the phrase in the creed, "I believe in the resurrection of the body." Now, she writes to her old theology professor, "it has to do with the everlasting life of my son, the resurrection of his body to which I first gave birth. It is not now an esoteric exercise in creedal affirmation. It is my fervent mother-hope that my baby, my firstborn child, is not lost forever, is not lost to me forever, is not lost" (*And Then Mark Died: Letters of Grief, Love, and Faith*, p.17).

"Unbind him and let him go," Jesus commanded of Lazarus, and we hear very little of him again. I found myself wondering, as I thought about this

text this time around, “Go where?” Where did Lazarus go? What did he do? Did he live out the rest of his life differently? He must have. Death teaches us how very precious the gift of life is, the gift of our own lives. Reggie Jackson, great baseball player, now coaching, was in an automobile accident last week, hit from behind in Florida, his vehicle flipped over several times. He emerged with a few scratches and bruises and said, “I just learned how good it is to be alive.” Death does that: teaches us how very good it is to be alive, teaches us the value of every new day, teaches us gratitude every morning, teaches us to not be wasteful, to make every day count because every day is a gift we did nothing to earn or deserve.

Jane Kenyon was among our most distinguished poets and one of the most beloved poems is “Otherwise”:

> I got out of bed
> on two strong legs
> It might have been
> otherwise. I ate
> cereal, sweet
> milk, ripe, flawless
> peach. It might
> have been otherwise.
> . . .
> All morning I did
> the work I love.
>
> . . .
> We ate dinner together at a table with silver candlesticks.
> It might have been otherwise.
> I slept in a bed
> in a room with paintings
> on the wall, and
> planned another day
> just like this day.
> But one day, I know
> it will be otherwise.
> (from *Otherwise,* Graywolf Press, 1996)

Death teaches us how beautiful and precious life is, teaches us to “number our days” and to live every one of them, to live with our eyes and ears open, to drink it all in, every single day of it.

There’s something of that going on right in front of our eyes as Pope John Paul II simply refuses to stop living every day of his life. The *Tribune* observed that it makes no sense and that for Americans, “with our Puritan-bred devotion to performance review and productivity, the inability to fully

do our jobs would be reason enough for most of us to quit." John Paul II, instead, keeps on living each day, painfully, awkwardly, doing what he knows himself called to do, testifying every painful day, to the truth that human life is precious, that even weak and vulnerable and diminishing, human life has value (editorial, 5 March 2005).

"Unbind him and let him go." Death teaches us to look for and identify whatever it is that keeps us from living fully. Death teaches us to never be content to be a victim, to stop whining and blaming other people for our problems, to take responsibility for our lives. Down through the centuries, the raising of Lazarus, his walking away from his grave clothes, has brought courage and hope to people living under political oppression, people who understandably knew themselves to be living in the midst of death and who decided not to allow death to have dominion over them. It was a favorite story for American slaves literally bound by their chains and for house churches in Central America, as death squads threatened and brutalized and killed; to blacks living in the nightmare of apartheid in South Africa. And this story can be your promise that Jesus Christ is on the side of life, your life, as you look for the strength and courage to walk away from whatever holds you back, keeps you from living fully the gift of your life.

"I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus said. We have not arrived at Easter yet. As we follow him to Jerusalem in the days ahead, his triumphal entry, his betrayal, arrest, we will come finally to his own encounter with the power of death, his crucifixion. Even now, though, as he walks bravely toward his own death, we can see that he is winning the battle; that death will not defeat him; that in him death itself will be defeated; that love, the love of God that lived in him, will rise to new and everlasting life.

> "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
> Lord, hear my voice," the psalmist wrote.

It is the quintessential human cry, uttered sooner or later by every one of us. We live with the presence of death daily, the death of our soldiers, the death of innocent civilians, death from terrorist attacks, government-sponsored genocide in Africa, an AIDs pandemic, unnecessary death from hunger, and random death in courtrooms and suburban homes and even a church service, yesterday the deaths of beloved parents. And, of course, our own death. But, we, because we know and trust Jesus Christ, who is the resurrection and the life and who can bring life out of death, we also live with a greater reality, a more powerful power: the love of God, from which nothing, not even death can separate us, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

"Before every birth and after every death there is still God," Bill Coffin writes at the end of his memoir. "The abyss of God's love is deeper than the abyss of death" (pp. 169–172).

In the meantime we are free to live fully and gratefully, every day of the life that is ours, and to know that those who have gone before us are safe in the mercy and love of God.

Marilynn Robinson's wonderful novel *Gilead* is about an elderly minister who has congestive heart failure and knows he doesn't have long to live. The Reverend John Ames lost his first wife and infant daughter, Rebecca, years before, but later in life he married again and had another child, a son. The book is his letter to his son, so that the boy will remember his father.

> Here I am trying to be wise, the way a father should be, the way an old pastor certainly should be. I don't know what to say except that the worst misfortune isn't only misfortune—and even as I write these words, I have that infant Rebecca in my mind, the way she looked when I held her, what I seem to remember, because every single time I have christened a baby I have thought of her again. That feeling of a baby's brow against the palm of your hand—how I have loved this life. (p. 56).

At the very end, Ames writes, "Theologians talk about a prevenient grace that precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it. I think there must also be a prevenient courage that allows us to be brave—that is to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm" (p. 246).

Jesus wept—for the loss of his dear friend, but I think also they were tears of gratitude for the good gift of life, his own life, and the tears of joy in the promise of God's eternal love, which would keep him through the terrible days ahead, would keep him through the valley of the shadow of death, God's eternal love that will keep us, and our dear ones, forever.

"I am the resurrection and the life," he said. "Those who believe in me, though they die, will live. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Thanks be to God.

Dear God thank you for your love which lived among us in Jesus Christ. Thank you that in him we and our dear ones are safe and at home, forever. Amen.